Newsletter of the African Burial Ground & Five Points Archaeological Projects

U P D A T E

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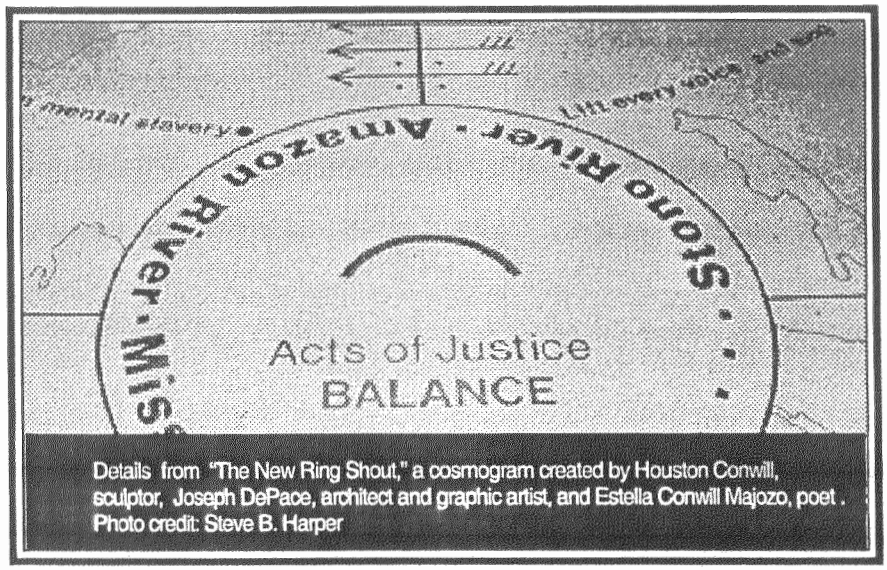
In This Issue...

COMMEMORATING THE PAST THROUGH ART

Marie-Alice Devieux

This report features the artwork at 290 Broadway, site of an African Burial Ground which dates back to New York's colonial era. Designed to commemorate the men, women and children buried there, the interpretive meaning behind the sculpture, cosmogram, and mosaic currently on display, offer fascinating insights into each artist's personal vision.



Details from "The New Ring Shout," a cosmogram created by Houston Conwill, sculptor, Joseph DePace, architect and graphic artist, and Estella Conwill Majozo, poet. Photo credit: Steve B. Harper

Towering above the recessed entrance of the 290 Broadway building is **America Song**, a piece designed by sculptor Clyde Lynds. Lynds' wing of an eagle is flanked by ribbons, banners and bursts of radiating light. The 32' x 16' wall mounted relief emerges from stone in an interplay of concrete, granite, steel, light and poetry.

Lynds chose an eagle wing as a metaphor for the universal longing for freedom and as a "sign of hope, a memorial and a reminder" of the enslavement endured by the majority of those interred in the African Burial Ground. It is designed, in the artists words, to provide an "uplifting hopeful feeling on [a] public building." Most dramatic in its night time display, **America Song** is embedded with fiber optics, which when illuminated convey the illusion of rising momentum.

Continued on Page 8

CELEBRATE WOMEN'S HISTORY : "IN MY WORLD, BLACK WOMEN CAN DO ANYTHING." JULIE DASH, FILM MAKER

(((LETTERS TO THE EDITOR (((

Preserving the past

...Thank you for contacting me regarding the President's Council on Historic Preservation. I appreciate the opportunity to respond to your concerns.

The National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 established the Advisory Council to preserve historic and cultural resources. The Council advises the President and Congress on preservation of historic sites and provides consultation on those historic properties which may be threatened by federal action. The Council performs the vital role of safe-guarding the nation's historic resources for future generations.

I have long been an advocate of the Council and, therefore, supported an amendment which increased its funding by $2 million dollars. I also vehemently opposed an amendment which would have eliminated all federal funding for the National Trust on Historic Preservation. Please be assured that in the future, I will continue to support legislation which will allow the Council to perform its important advisory role.

Eliot L. Engel, Member of Congress
17th District New York
Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515-3217

[Ed. note: See Community Voices pg. 11 in relation to safeguarding the African Burial Ground]

Stamp Act

Please find enclosed our contribution to the petition campaign for a commemorative stamp for the African Burial Ground. We got in the campaign quite late and we had only one weekend to collect signatures. As a result, we were not quite well prepared; otherwise we would have collected much, much more than 190 signatures. Should you for a reason or another decide to extend the deadline, please notify us immediately and we shall try to help.

Saint Augustine is the Mother Church of African-American Catholics in the Nation's Capitol, and we are committed to educate and uphold the spiritual and cultural heritage of our people all over the World. Please feel free to consider us your other home, to call on us and keep us posted on your endeavors.

Spearheaded by:
Alimasi Ntal-I'Mbirwa, Coordinator
The Social Justice Subcommittee
on Africa and the Diaspora

Stamp Act Too!

I have enclosed some signatures of petitioners from Tennessee State University for support of the effort to commemorate the African Burial Ground in the National Historic District of New York City with a postage stamp. Indeed, the African Burial Ground is significant to African Americans as a sacred and important enough place to deserve a postage stamp. The African Burial Ground is a significant find, a project of such national stature that its existence should be documented nationally.

I understand the resistance from those who yet refuse to equate fairness **with equality,** and seldom fail to give a rationale for excluding black culture and history from the pages of America's heritage. In Tennessee, too, we have fought and won battles to get black historical markers placed on sites of historical significance. So, many of us here at Tennessee State University fully support the African Burial Ground Project...

Bobby L. Lovett, Dean
College of Arts & Sciences
Tennessee State Univ.

I was truly taken with the quest to obtain a commemorative stamp for the African Burial Ground. I not only circulated petitions to my sorority but also within my community I gathered over 100 signatures. I am aware of the rejections the General Postmaster, however, that only inspires me to continue to collect signatures...

Maresha Johnson
Sankofa Editor

I had the pleasure of meeting you last month at the AAA Symposium in Washington, DC and was quite pleased with your efforts to petition the U.S. Postmaster for an African Burial Ground Commemorative Stamp. I have taken the liberty of duplicating several petitions and circulated them among my associates. I trust our efforts assist you in achieving the required number of signatures necessary to pursue this matter to the next level.

Anthony T. Browder
Institute of Karmic Guidance
Washington, DC

[Ed. note: See page 10 for an update on the stamp petition drive]

OPEI welcomes letters but due to limited space reserves the right to edit for length and clarity.

NOTES FROM THE HOWARD UNIVERSITY BIOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY LABORATORY

Dr. Michael L. Blakey,
Scientific Project Director

Howard University Research Reaches New Plateau

However carefully planned a research project may be, it is always an adventure. Exploring the unknown and encountering the unexpected is what research is all about. The African Burial Ground project certainly qualifies as such an adventure.

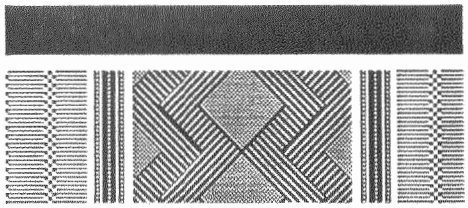
There are also regular phases of research, a life cycle of a project, that one comes to fully expect as a project matures. Like a child's growth, parents know their child will be "terrible" at two years of age while every two-year-old is unique in the way he or she expresses a new found confidence and independence.

For two and one-half years now, Howard University's staff has been getting to know each skeleton in our care, one by one. Cleaning, mending together, and inventorying bones. As that work is completed, we determine age and sex, take numerous measurements wherever we can, note the genetic markers of teeth and bones, and assess the indicators of disease, nutrition, work, stress, and trauma in each skeleton. Previous reports in **Update** by Mark Mack and Cassandra Hill have discussed some of the interesting individuals we have met on the laboratory bench, along the way.

Numerous, detailed photographs have been taken of the bones and teeth as a permanent record of what was found.

Other documentation, such as x-ray radiography, is also in progress. These records will make it possible for the next generations of researchers to continue exploration long after the ancestral remains have been returned to their place of rest in the New York African Burial Ground.

At present, 365 of the remains have been cleaned, reconstructed, and inventoried. Most of the other work has been done to provide the data that we need to interpret their lives. By the end of March of this year, all (possibly 427)



remains will have been cleaned, reconstructed and inventoried. By summer, the basic data described above will have been collected and documented and the project will be fully engaged in statistical research and the writing of our first major report. We have come a long way on our research journey.

Six months ago, work was completed on a large enough sample of remains to allow us to begin statistical research. Those who are unfamiliar with statistics, sometimes find the mere mention of the word intimidating. But that need not be so. Everyone is engaging in a statistical analysis when we say, "most people" act this way, or that "few people" behave that way. If called into question about such assertions, we might qualify our statements by indicating that we are referring only to "personal experience" or behavior in a particular community, and not all groups of people.

Statistical and demographic methods provide means of demonstrating group trends in carefully qualified ways. This report will give some of those group trends in the African Burial Ground population that tell just how widespread the problems enslaved Africans faced were. The project reaches a new plateau as we begin the quantitative analysis of biological data.

There are other ways in which our project has reached a new plateau. When I began pulling together a team of researchers in March of 1992, I identified the best African Americanists and skeletal biologists who I knew worked at the highest research standards and who would also commit to the struggle in which the descendant community was then engaged. That group was expanded during the development of the, Howard University-John Milner Associates (JMA) research design. The inclusion of Africanists and other African Diasporic researchers has increased proportionately, as our understanding of the site has improved. A recent **Update** report shows what a difference the analysis of Howard's African art historian, Dr. Kweku Ofari-Ansa, has made in the interpretation of the heart-shaped symbol as the Ashanti symbol, "Sankofa." (**see Figure 1**)

It is not adequate to simply interpret the use of a sacred plot of land in New York City. We must interpret the lives of the people buried there; lives that did not begin in the grave. The vast majority of the interpretation of the cultural symbolism and historical context of these ancestors has barely begun. We have spent more than 9 months negotiating that part of the contract with the U.S. General Services Administration (GSA).

But a great step forward has been made.

On November 11-14, 1995 **Sankofa I**, a meeting of specialists was held at Howard University and Trans Africa Forum in Washington, D.C. **Sankofa I** brought together leading Africanists and African Americanist biologists, archaeologists, and historians of the project for the first time. For years, the project received advice from these specialists through my correspondence with them, but there were no funds to allow this national and international team to meet together. The GSA allocated that funding, and we knew enough about the remains by November to engage in a detailed plan of how to proceed in all aspects of the project.

Professor Warren Perry of Central Connecticut State University (under contract with Howard) has been named Associate Director for Archaeology (replacing Dr. Warren Barbour). Professor Perry's archaeological studies have included both African and African American sites, such as New York's Sandy Ground. He will coordinate all of the specialized archaeological research, as well as have oversight of the processing of artifacts (cleaning, cataloging, conservation and computerization) done in the Foley Square Laboratory.

The **Sankofa I** meeting included Drs. Kofi Agorsa (African and Caribbean archaeology) Christopher R. DeCorse (African slave trade archaeology), Augustin Holl (African mortuary archaeologist), and Theresa Singleton (American plantation archaeologist). Dr. Sheila Walker, a distinguished cultural anthropologist specializing in African diasporic religions, also contributed to **Sankofa I.** The plans they developed for the analysis of spatial relationships of the burials, artifacts, and ritual context were breathtakingly sophisticated and will be underway in February upon approval of our contract. John Milner Associate's archaeologists Michael Parrington and Rebecca Yamin's unique memories of the excavation also added to the Sankofa participants understanding of the site.

The geneticists refined their approaches. Drs. Fatimah Jackson and Matthew George discussed their preliminary findings that genetic information could be extracted from partially decomposed bones from the site. Dr. Shomarka Keita coordinated his work on facial form with theirs.

The other dominant discipline represented at the meeting was Diasporic history. Dr. Edna Medford (Howard University) has been named Associate Director for History. She is coordinating the other, mainly Howard University researchers who are ready now to begin to build a diasporic context for interpretation.

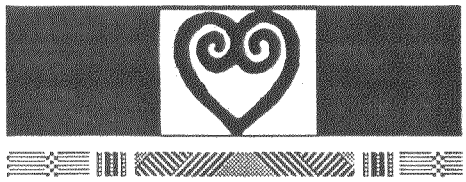


Figure 1. Sankofa

In addition to assembling all of the potentially useful facts on the lives of enslaved Africans in 17th and 18th century New York City, Drs. Medford, Joseph Reidy and Linda Hayward will search for archival evidence of their African backgrounds. They will examine the routes used for the trade in enslaved Africans, both within the African continent and across the Atlantic and Caribbean in order to provide leads as to the most probable cultural origins and early experiences of the people buried in New York.

The historians and archaeologists have developed a plan to create a bibliography of literature and archives pertaining to West and Central African burial practices. Housing conditions, public health, and historical events related to the lives of enslaved Africans in colonial New York will also be examined from historical documents. Dr. Sherrill Wilson, in her role as project ethnohistorian, will be instrumental in facilitating the historian's studies at archives in New York City. Of course, our skeletal biologists were also at **Sankofa I** along with JMA researchers.

Sankofa I is the first meeting of its kind. It's multi-disciplinary scope is unparalleled in the history of archaeological projects in the United States. Never before had these African and African American researchers had a chance to meet together intensively. The fact that these representatives of different fields and regions were bringing their information to bear on the problems of a single site, made their discussions practical as well as theoretical, and therefore more productive than would otherwise occur. This was exciting, not only because **Sankofa I** marked a new plateau in the progress of the African Burial Ground Project. We were building a Diasporic bridge and discussion among scholars, and setting the stage for what we hoped might be emulated as a new standard for anthropological research.

It should also be mentioned that the W. Montague Cobb Human Skeletal Collection was celebrated in a ceremony at Howard University, following **Sankofa I.** On November 15th, the Biological Anthropology Laboratory was formally named **The Cobb Laboratory.**

Scholarly and Public Support

November 1995 was a fertile month for the project. The American Anthropological Association (AAA) is the flagship professional organization for anthropologists, with a membership of more than 11,000. This year, the AAA met in Washington, D.C. Dr. Sherrill Wilson and Ms. Teresa Leslie organized three symposia on the New York African Burial Ground. These dealt with the current results and plans of the project,

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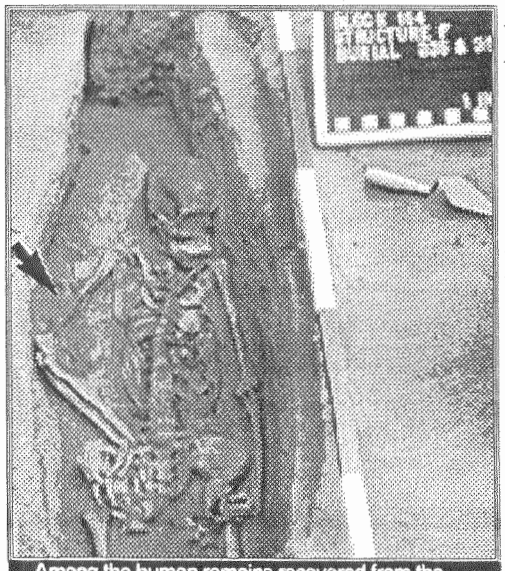
the archaeology of the slave trade, and scholarly views of the descendant community's involvement in the project. **Sankofa I** participants and **OPEI** staff were prominently involved.

The most unique and important feature of these symposia was community involvement at the meetings. These symposia were the first in the history of our profession to which the general public were invited. Our public education staff at **The Cobb Laboratory**, (Richlyn Goddard and Jamilla Rashid) organized volunteers in Washington to undertake an extensive public outreach campaign with my help and that of **OPEI.** Announcements were sent out to local colleges, school teachers, African American organizations (drug rehabilitation centers, Afrocentric study groups, fraternal orders, etc.), churches, businesses, African and Caribbean embassies; everyone we could think of who might be interested. As a result, we filled a hall for an audience of 750 people over a two day period. Several leaders from the N.Y. descendant community took the time to travel to Washington to attend.

As is in the nature of the "engaged" and "activist" scholarship of our project, we were not only interested in telling the public about what we were doing and had learned (although that is important). We sought the public's recommendations and critical evaluations. A questionnaire was distributed and 124 people responded, nearly 1/2 of whom were non-anthropologists. I hope that **Update** will report some of the results of the questionnaire survey in a future issue. Having already seen those results, I can say now that the symposia were very well received by about 99% of those in attendance. The questions and answers at the end of the last session was also very informative, although we have learned for the future that we need to provide more opportunity for comments at the end of each session.

The implications of the success of our public symposia, like everything else that we attempt to do on the project, is not limited to the important concerns of the African Burial Ground alone. We are now situated to recommend that such public sessions take place every year at the AAA meetings. For example, a meeting held in New Mexico should emphasize Mexican American issues and invite the Mexican American public. In this way, the study of humankind takes place less "behind closed doors" and the field becomes more accountable to the people of the earth whom we study. I like to think that our African ancestors would appreciate being instrumental in such leadership, so long as the Africana communities have their say too.



Among the human remains recovered from the site was a mother cradling an infant in her arms. The infant appeared as a dark discoloration of the soil because its bones were too fragile to survive. Photo credit. Dennis Seckler

As I lecture at the leading universities in the United States I find that the African Burial Ground Project's significance has evolved. Two years ago, the negative impact of racism and heroic struggle of the African/African American descendants in New York took center stage. The opponents of Howard University's approach to a publically engaged, biocultural, and anti-racist science also insinuated their objections more often than not. Over the last few months there has been a change in perception as people learn of what we are actually accomplishing, how and why. This project has now emerged as the leading model for the way in which such anthropological research should be conducted as we approach the 21st century.

We are making a difference. Whether among the students and faculty of the University of California-Berkeley or the Society for Historical Archaeology meetings, the lessons and admonitions of the African Burial Ground are helping to foster new directions for anthropologists throughout the nation. And the general public's desire to know about and remain close to what we are doing has increased, not declined. **OPEI's** record of more than 30,000 visitors and 6,100 regular **Update** subscribers is evidence of this, as is the continuous flow of visitors to **The Cobb Laboratory.**

None of this would have been possible had it not been for the leadership of New York's descendant community, and their supporters across the United States, who won the right to handle this project in our own way.

Quantitative Studies: Two Examples

Two skeletal indicators, one involving teeth and the other involving bone, serve to demonstrate the kinds of basic statistics currently being derived. Each involves samples of the African Burial Ground population. This information is not as certain to reflect trends that we will be shown from a study of the entire population of skeletons. It should nonetheless, provide a reasonable approximation of what we can expect to find at the end of our study.

The first indicator of interest is dental enamel hypoplasia, a developmental defect of dental enamel that results from childhood malnutrition and disease (**see Figure 2**). Our laboratory at Howard has been conducting research on these defects in enslaved and free black populations since 1985. As a result, we can compare the New York population to those who were enslaved in Virginia

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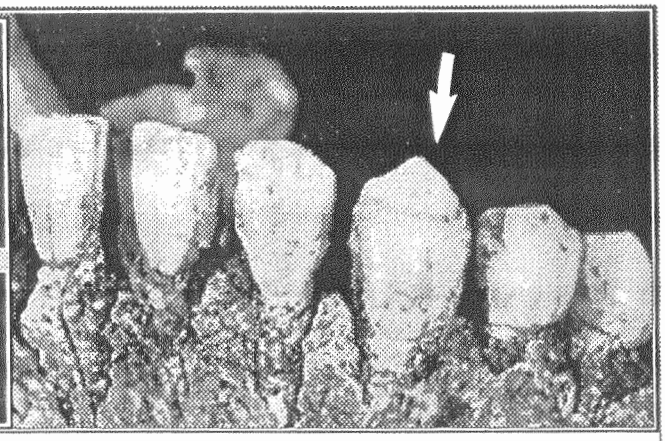
centuries, as well as to a mixed group of free and enslaved African Americans who died in Philadelphia during the first half of the 19th century (**see Figure 3**). Another 19th century South Carolina plantation studied by Dr. Ted Rathbun will also be used for comparisons. Those interested in a full description of those earlier studies, should consult our article[1] available in any university library.

Figure 2
An example of Hypoplasia, the result of nutritional and disease problems that occur in the young.

Photo credit:
Otto Jerome Edwards
The Cobb Laboratory
Howard University



As we all know from experience, "baby teeth" (primary or deciduous dentition) first grow below the gums and then erupt and appear over time to produce a full set of small, children's teeth. Hypoplasia in these teeth occur before they appear in the mouth, and represent nutritional and disease problems that interrupted dental growth during the first year of the child's life.

Examine the black bars of the chart shown below. This shows the relative frequency (the per cent) of children who died before they were 12 years old, who had at least one defect in their baby teeth. You will see that a little over 60% of the New York African Burial Ground and Philadelphia children had health problems that would cause dental hypoplasia during their infancies. These are among the highest frequencies shown for baby teeth in any human population. [Data from baby teeth are not yet available from the southern plantation studies.] The fact that the health of these children had been stressed as early as infancy probably has some relationship to the fact that they died in childhood.

Now, let us turn to the information shown in the shaded (men) and white (women) bars of the chart. Let's begin with what we all know to be true, and that is that adult teeth (called secondary or permanent teeth) begin to erupt and replace the baby teeth as a person matures. These adult skeletons were persons who had lived long enough to have a full set of adult teeth by the time of death. Although they were all more than 17 years of age when they died, their dental enamel had developed under the gums during childhood. So, the developmental defects in their tooth enamel had occurred during their childhoods, providing a record of health problems during the first years of life.

Alright, this gets to be a little complicated (even for professional researchers). Just bear in mind that all defect frequencies represent nutritional and disease problems of childhood. The black bars of the chart show the extent of those problems for people who did not survive beyond childhood; who never grew up. The shaded and white bars show those individuals who, while stressed as children, survived those health problems and later died as adult men and women. Of the latter group, about 50% of the adults in the African Burial Ground had had at least one bout of health problems during their childhoods. Compared with the other populations, those who died as adults in New York experienced childhoods that were about 1/2 as stressful (1/2 the frequency) of dental defects as in South Carolina, Virginia, Maryland, and Philadelphia.

Do we conclude that life was better for Africans in Colonial New York than at other sites? If the evidence from baby teeth also showed low frequencies of defects, we might reach just that conclusion. Those dying as children in New York City, however, seem to be just as stressed as the children of Philadelphia.

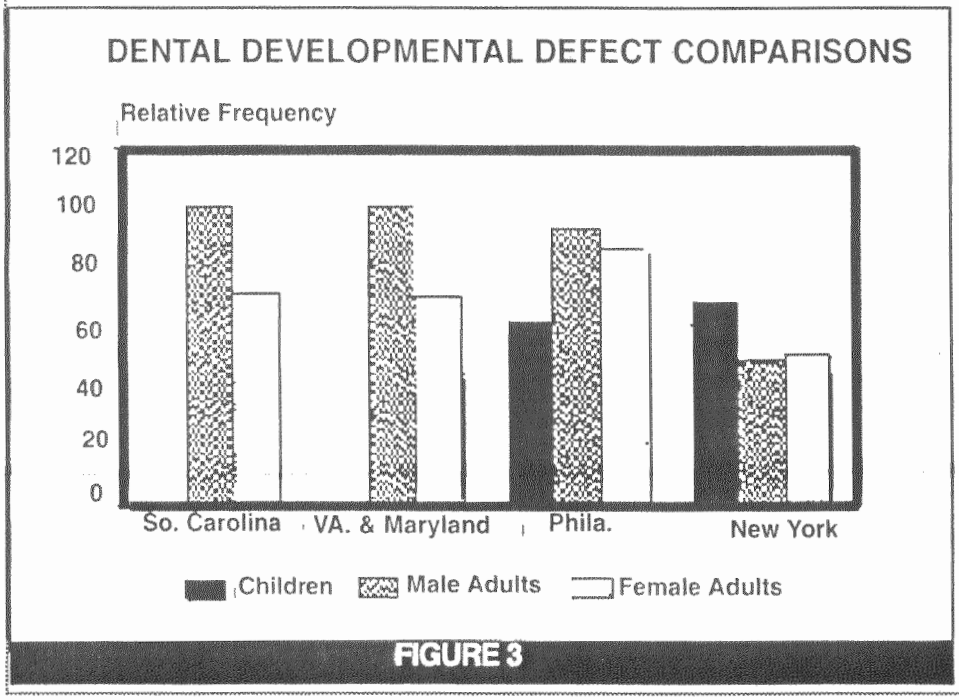


FIGURE 3

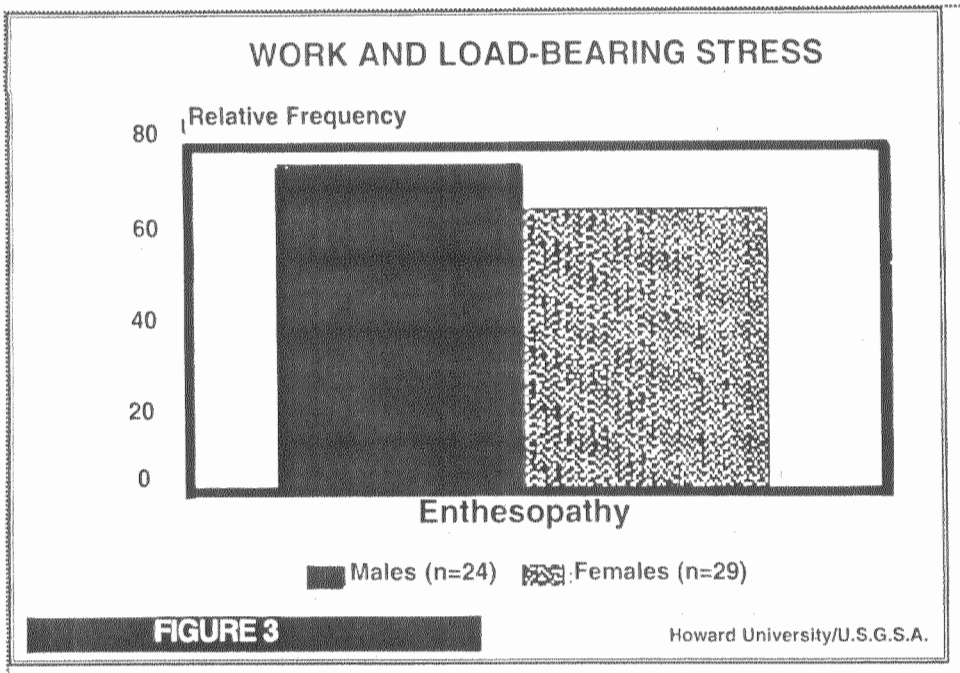


FIGURE 3 Howard University/U.S.G.S.A.

Those dying as adults in Philadelphia have the very high frequencies of prior childhood stress shown for southern plantations. Our other data on childhood diseases and high death rates in New York, also point to very poor health during the early years of life.

The dental record of relatively good health during the early lives of those who died as adults in New York, is inconsistent with the other findings. They are the "odd man out" in this analysis. It is as though those who died in New York City often had childhoods in some other healthier society and economic environment than their dead children.

Our best guess at this point in the study, is that those who died as adults are showing evidence of the lower stresses of life they experienced as children in various African societies where they had previously lived. Those who died while children in New York show evidence of poor health in New York. Evidence of poor health that is comparable to Philadelphia and, by extension, similar to the plantation south. Our historians already tell us that many of those buried in the African Burial Ground should have been children in Africa. The biological data should make us even more curious about what those African societies were like.

A second example of the physical quality of life contributes to the view of colonial New York as harsh for its African population. As earlier **Update** reports by Mark Mack and Cassandra Hill have shown, we are gathering very interesting information about the skeletal stresses of rigorous work and heavy load bearing and lifting in those who died as adults. Most muscles are attached to bony ridges. As strain on muscles persists for long periods of time, those bony attachments become enlarged in order to better adapt to the strain. When that strain is too great for the bony attachments to handle, the muscles will tear away along with plugs of bone, leaving large, often elongated bone lesions called "enthesopathies."

Our second chart (**see Figure 3**) shows the frequencies of enthesopathy in a representative sample of the adult African Burial Ground populations. The evidence is dramatic. About 75% of men and 65% of women had at least one enthesopathic lesion in the shoulders, arms, or legs. This is clear evidence of extreme work and load-bearing in **most** adults, which pressed them to the very limits of human work capacity. Although it is clearly true that their work experiences were very harsh, few studies record enthesopathies routinely. It might become necessary for us to examine other, comparative populations (such as the colonial English in New York City or contemporary Ashanti in Ghana) before we can get a handle on the relative severity of those harsh experiences. The historians will add much to our analysis by telling us the range of the types of work in which the Africans of Colonial New York were involved. We are carrying on at The Cobb Laboratory with these and many other explorations. The examples given are meant to provide a sense of what the increasingly analytical phases of our work entail. I welcome everyone to think about these ideas and to write us in order to contribute their own possible explanations for what we are finding.

The languages of science and history in which these ancestors have slowly begun to speak of their lives cannot be translated literally. In the two years of work performed by scores of students and professionals, we have pieced together many of the metaphorical words and sentences of the story. All of us at Howard University hope to share our excitement as we construct the paragraphs and pages of that story during the next four years.

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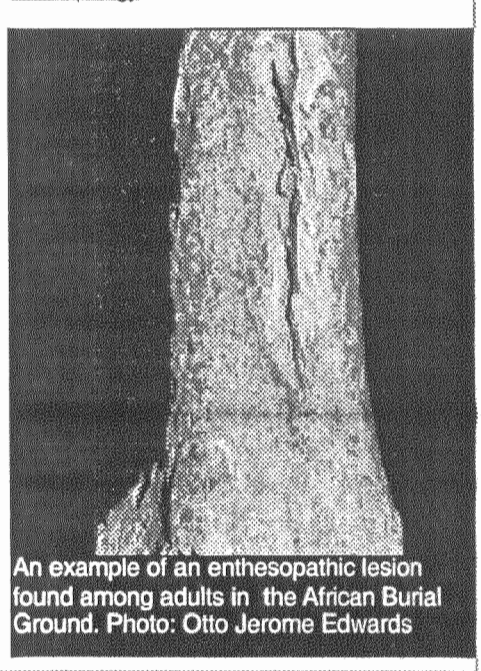
Cited work: 1. Blakey, M.L., Leslie, T.E., and Reidy, J.P. (1994) "Frequency and Chronological Distribution of Dental Enamel Hypoplasia in enslaved African Americans: A Test of the Weaning Hypothesis." American Journal of Physical Anthropology 95: 371-383.



An example of an enthesopathic lesion found among adults in the African Burial Ground. Photo: Otto Jerome Edwards

Commemorating the Past (continued from page 1)

The largest sculpture of its kind using this unique medium of alternating light, Lynds' use of fiber optics is a technique he has developed over twenty years.

The illuminated wing is grounded by the inscribed words of an anonymous writer believed to be African American, which also resonate with movement:

I want to be free
Want to be free
Rainbow 'round my shoulder
Wings on my feet

Once within the building, visitors are often awed by the brilliance of a color cosmogram, 30' in diameter, installed in the flooring of the columned rotunda. Three concentric circles of aqua blue, white and terra-cotta are inlaid with vibrant brass within a stone border. At first glance **The New Ring Shout** is an overwhelming, intricate puzzle composed of words, figures, quotations, signs and symbols. But a careful examination of the components reveal the artists' intentions to communicate the multi-layered complexity which comprise New York City culture.

While all of the artwork at the site was designed to pay homage, the cosmogram offers an almost familiar link to the past. Its outer aqua blue ring symbolizing water, holds English quotations which are translated into fourteen international languages. The words of such scholars and courageous leaders as Mary McCleod Bethune, Malcolm X, Ida B. Wells, and John Henrik Clarke, are immortalized in their translations to Zulu, Hebrew, Italian and Chinese, respectively. The inner white ring holds the names of 24 African nations victimized by Trans-Atlantic enslavement. The terra-cotta central ring, symbolizing earth, is superimposed with several spirals, symbols,verses and a map of New York City.

The **New Ring Shout's** synthesis of secular icons, was conceived by a three member team of artists in the tradition of world ceremonial ground designs. They are sculptor Houston Conwill, architect Joseph DePace, and poet Estella Conwill Majozo. According to art historian Robert Farris Thompson, ground markings often form the intricately beautiful ritual "dancing courts" familiar to the peoples of Angola, Haiti, Zambia and Zaire among others (Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy, NY: Vintage, 1983). In fact, the **New Ring Shout** cosmogram is a "dance floor" named after the historic ring shout which is in the artists' words "...a dance of praise rooted in circle dances and is part of the religious experience throughout the African diaspora in celebrations, including weddings, baptisms, funeral services, and as an opportunity for catharsis and release."

"Re-choreographing" the old Ring Shout, the artists place the "steps" of the **New Shout's** 7 pairs of female and male partners on a spiral superimposed on a map of New York City. The counter clockwise movements of the dancers touch upon 14 of the city's significant and polyethnic gathering places. Steps from the Tibetan Museum, Yankee and Shea Stadiums, and Ellis Island all end at the African Burial Ground. An inner spiral spans a range of twelve inspirational songs which include the African American spiritual "O Freedom," Reggae artist Bob Marley's "Redemption Song," and the contemporary rap lyrics of Harmony called "Man is Out of Sync." We, the modern dancers, are invited to symbolically journey to these signposts and songs through four water spheres (each with three bodies of water) labeled vision, grace, balance and speech.

Recognizing the tremendous relevance of place for contexualizing history, Conwill, DePace, and Majozo propose that they are "concerned with unearthing the spirituality buried in contemporary secular existence. Our multi-layered works are both political and spiritual, syncretizing traditional African, Judeo-Christian and Eastern religions, mythologies, and cosmologies, forming a synthesis of multi-cultural references... Our works," they humbly offer, "are acts of faith."

The final commemorative piece employs a similar spiritual desire. Installed high and virtually overlooking the burial ground from the Duane Street exit of the building, is a work viewed by its creator as a "cathedral for our time." **Roger Brown's Mosaic** is an elaborate design of radiantly colored glass tiles patterned as hexagonal faces which can be viewed as either descending or ascending from the equally seamless patterned skulls below them. Above the numerous and tightly packed faces are the tops of familiar New York City structures — the Brooklyn Bridge, the World Trade Center Towers, and the Empire State Building.

Compelling in both its aesthetic impact and breadth of vision, the mosaic measures 10' wide and 14' high. "[B]elow the modern skyline of New York City," writes Brown, "a contemporary tapestry of human faces, each made thin and hollow by the ravages of AIDS, descends like some medieval nightmare into a mosaic of death heads in memory of all races who have suffered and died too soon."

Although aware that none of those interred in the New York African Burial Ground fell victim to the AIDS crisis, Brown asserts that many of their lives were claimed by injuries and disease augmented by the harsh realities of their predicament as enslaved persons. He states that his "...theme uses the gaunt faces of AIDS victims interspersed by race and contrasted to the skulls of the slavery victims found in the Black cemetery. The city rises in the background as if growing out of the heap of human misery left behind."

→

Merging symbols from the natural world, ritual, and contemporary social issues, the artwork at 290 Broadway is often moving to both children and adults. They are touched by the emotional impact of the pieces offered as small commemorations for ancestors buried in the African Burial Ground. Coaxing memory and feeling, the sculptures vividly illustrate the words of **New Ring Shout** artist, Estella Conwill Majozo, which invite us to

Dance upon the amulet —
Hallowed place of human bone
comfort the ancestors' spirits
Feel the rising in your own

Group tours of the African Burial Ground site and the artwork of the adjoining building can be scheduled with the OPEI by calling (212) 432-5707.

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An Important Postscript...

David Rashid Gayle was the first artist to publicize and commemorate the African Burial Ground. His acrylic and collage painting, entitled *The African Burial Ground,* features the familiar area of Manhattan where City Hall, courthouses and office buildings form the hub of municipal power.

Gayle makes an intriguing artistic statement through his image of African ancestors towering over a courthouse with pillars made from human bones. Designed to pay homage to the African labor which built this city, the artist uses kente cloth patterns and green candles to identify the area as the community where N.Y.'s early African population once lived and died.

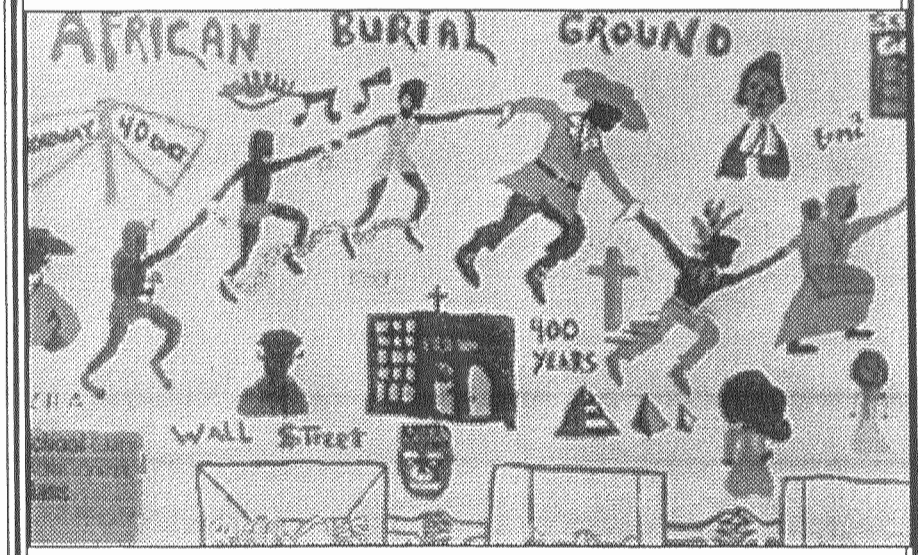
Responding to the cultural and political awareness generated by the African cemetery, Gayle also formed a partnership with the late Noel Pointer, an outspoken advocate for the site. Prints of his work were used by organizations for fundraising and have been featured in several exhibitions. Gayle's interpretive artwork has also been used as an educational tool and is currently referenced in the African American Heritage Guide used in New York City's Public Schools.

David Gayle's painting is on display at OPEI, 6 WTC, Room 239. -- E.B.

...AND A COLORFUL REMINDER

In the Spring of 1991 children's art work, mounted on the drab green construction fence surrounding the African Burial Ground, brought renewed focus to the embattled site. Awareness Through Art, a community service project sponsored by Linpro New York Realty, Inc. (LNYRI), supplied more than 1,000 public school children from New York City's five boros with art materials and 4 x 6 plywood panels. The emphasis was on finding creative ways to honor this historic site.

Celebrating missing chapters of New York history, the artwork covered a broad range of African American experiences, from scenes of enslavement to creative messages of protest concerning excavation of the site. The young artists' recognition of African and African American New Yorker's such as Simon Congo, Elizabeth Jennings, Big Manuel and others, sent out an informative images to those either unfamiliar with the city's early history, or uncertain about what lay behind the construction fence.



In the example shown above, the children at the Harborview Arts Center in Brooklyn depict Africans and Native Americans linked in celebration. Slightly visible in the foreground are human remains in their coffins. Familiar street signs, musical notes, spiritual symbols and a formidable looking church form a collage that speaks of journey, struggle and accomplishment.

With the exception of 63 art panels, stored in the basement of 290 Broadway, most of the children's artwork has been reclaimed. The controversial federal office building now towers over a small portion of the original cemetery saved from excavation. But the momentum and ultimate success in preserving the site and promoting New York's African and African American history owes a debt to the young artists who made a valuable and timely contribution. -- E.B.

African Burial Ground Update

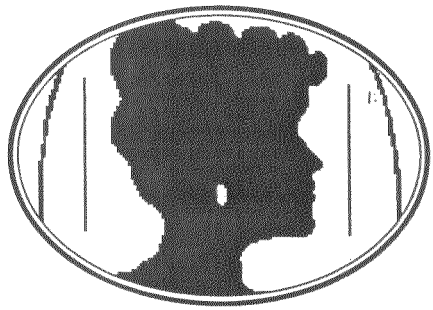
o **Chambers Street Excavation**
In October 1995 city officials obtained a one year permit from the Landmarks Preservation Commission for the purpose of excavating five interconnected trenches of varying dimensions on Centre and Chambers Streets. Both streets are clearly within the African Burial Ground Commons Historic District, a national and city landmark designation given in 1994 in recognition of the cemetery's historical significance. Ironically, Chambers Street is also the site of a February 1993 Con Edison snafu when human fragments were unearthed during installation of electrical transformers. Not too surprisingly, in this latest round of excavations fragments of human remains have been recovered, but with little media coverage or community awareness, work at Chambers Street continues (See Community Voices).

o **Status of Stamp Campaign**
Our goal of collecting 100,000 signatures in order to obtain a commemorative stamp for the African Burial Ground was based on the initial rejection of our September 1994 petition to the U.S. Postal Service. At that time it was stated by the Citizens Advisory Stamp Committee (CSAC), that a request for an African Burial Ground commemorative stamp was unwarranted because of "insufficient interest." As this issue of **Update** went to press, nearly 95,000 signatures, collected from 40 states in America and 15 foreign countries, including Italy, Tanzania, Ghana, Senegal and France, have challenged this assumption. Collecting signatures has also proved effective in passing on historical information and mobilizing organized support for the cemetery. Recently, 60,000 petitions were delivered to the Postmaster General's Office in Washington, D.C. by Richard Brown who has spearheaded the campaign since its inception. This phase of delivering the petitions is part of a long range plan to inundate post office officials. **A meeting with CSAC has been tentatively scheduled for April, in the interim OPEI plans to continue its efforts to distribute and receive petitions through April 1, 1996.** For further information or petitions, please call 212.432.5707.

o **Educator's Symposium**
On Saturday, Nov. 4, 1995 OPEI presented "The African Burial Ground Revisited." Highlighting past and future objectives, the invited panel of scholars and activists offered personal and collective experiences that contributed to the preservation of the site. The observations of Peggy King Jorde, Elombe Brath, Richard Brown, Verna Francis, Muhammad Hatim, Dr. Joseph Jackson, Christopher Moore, Barbara Muniz, and others recalled a number of events including initial recovery of the cemetery, community/GSA meetings, the making of the documentary film *The African Burial Ground: An American Discovery*, and the politics of trying to obtain a commemorative stamp for the African Burial Ground. The session, well received by an audience of 200, ended on an upbeat note as each speaker cautioned the audience to remain vigilant about the African Burial Ground's future.

o **Spring Youth Symposium: Saturday, March 23, 1996, 10am-5pm**, OPEI proudly presents a Youth Symposium whose theme is **"Passing the Torch."** Parents, educators, and community members are encouraged to attend and bring a young person age 12 or older. Events for the day include film showings, slide presentations, lab tours, musical guests, and a Youth Prayer Vigil. The keynote speaker will be Joan Maynard, President of Weeksville Historical Society. Please reserve your space for this momentous occasion by calling **212.432.5707.**

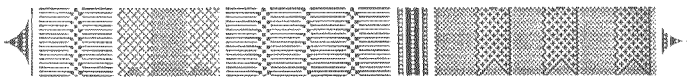
Related Matters:
o **Dr. Sherrill D. Wilson, OPEI Director,** was presented with an Achievement Award for her work on the African Burial Ground Project. The award was presented on "Focus on Education," Channel 14 Cablevision of Westchester, by the show's producer, Mrs. Phyllis Murray.



o **Women's History Month Celebration at OPEI!**
The Good Works of New York City's 19th Century African American Women will be presented by Dr. Sherrill D. Wilson, Urban Anthropologist. A lunch time lecture will be given on **Thursday, March 21, 1996 from 12:00 noon to 1:00 pm** and after work on **Wednesday March 27, 1996 from 5:30 pm to 6:30 pm** at OPEI, 6 World Trade Center, U.S. Custom House, Room 239. **Call 212.432.5707 for reservations.**

ARE YOU ON OUR MAILING LIST?
Please submit names and/or corrections to
OPEI, 6 World Trade Center, U.S. Custom House,
Rm. 239, New York, New York 10048

COMMUNITY VOICES



Compiled by Chadra D. Pittman

OPEI has received countless inquiries concerning recent excavation at Chambers Street where fragmented human remains were recovered. Issued a permit by the Landmarks Preservation Commission in October of 1995, New York City officials have indicated that the excavation is a necessity that will provide air conditioning for several buildings in the vicinity. The excavation is within the African Burial Ground and Commons Historic District, a New York City and national landmark. We asked our readers for their comments regarding this situation.

Yvonne Bennett, Librarian, Medgar Evers

There has to be some way that the appropriate engineering concerns can find other ways to install these air conditioning ducts, if you will. Being that the African Burial Ground has been and always will be a part of the African American heritage, by digging in those areas they are destroying the heritage of a large group of people in this country. There are other ways of putting in air conditioning units and I think that those ways should be explored and if they are costly then let it be on the industry that constructed those buildings in the first place, without concern for what was there. Historically, they must have known what was there and subsequently, they have found out definitely what is there and I think that if it was any other group of people that they would have found an alternative way to install the air conditioning units which would not desecrate graves.

Sonny Carson, Community Activist

I am instantly prepared to be upset and I think that I need to reiterate my feelings. I am outraged that they continue to ignore our feelings, a continued intrusion on sacred ground. If they think that the normal response is the one that will be continued to be given, then they are going to need to look over their shoulders. We are not going to accept these continued insults. We did not ask to be here, we were forced to be here and we will not continue to accept insult after insult.

Joe Jackson, Community Activist

You know, I feel strongly that they fail to recognize the importance of honoring our ancestors and just as our people in high places have historically responded, they have never had any respect for us, living or dead. I feel that the excavation should be discontinued forthwith, immediately and find other means of providing air conditioning for the buildings or whatever facilities they feel need air conditioning. At the beginning of the 21st century, with all of the modern technology that we have in this country, technology untapped, it seems impossible, I find it impossible, to accept that they can't find alternative means to supply whatever energy they need to build the air conditioning units. What they need to do is tap the technology and stop tapping the bones.

Phyllis C. Murray, Producer, Cable Network Show

It is disheartening to learn of another excavation into what is designated a Historic African Burial Ground Site. This area, once known as the Negro's Burying Ground in the 17th century, was once honored as the final resting place for our ancestors; the enslaved Africans of the North. To bulldoze this sacred ground is morally wrong. Such wanton disregard for human remains is also sinful. Further, archaeologically, it is unsound. Hence, now is the time for the descendant community as well as the scientific community to join forces in a concerted effort to ensure the proper closure for New York City's latest Holocaust and "Archaeological Nightmare". I sincerely applaud Dr. Sherrill Wilson, OPEI Director, for her continued effort to enlighten us all. Press on my Sister!!

Carolyn Sherry, Community Activist

I don't like the idea of the city having the right to dig in this Historic District. I am very upset that these excavations are even taking place. When remains are uncovered, there needs to be a specific place for the bodies to be placed until the time of reinterment. The skeletons found at Chambers Street are locked up in some building. What are they going to do with the bodies at Chambers Street? Are they going to continue to allow skeletons to just deteriorate laying anywhere and everywhere in the city? I think that the women and men of the African Burial Ground Committee need to come together with this so called mayor and establish some sort of rules to establish where the bones that were found are going to be placed.

We need to follow up with the Preservation Committee to find out how this sort of permit could be issued. Now they can excavate anywhere in the area, whenever they want, and continue to destroy graves. Africans lived in that entire area, they can't help but come across graves while they are digging. And what will they do with the skeletons they find? We need to come together and meet with the Landmark Commission to find out what is going on.

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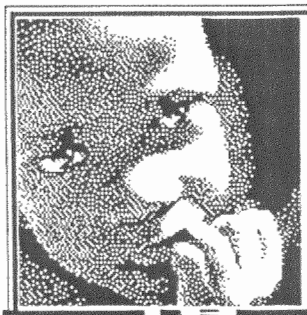

The Children's Corner:

Tamara Jubilee

Learning About History Through Art

Visual art, (something you can see using your talent or imagination to make interesting creations) whether it is in the form of a painting, sculpture, a sketch or any type of art you could think of, can "tell visual stories" from the imagination, about your own stories or even about important events in history.

Through ancient visual art, messages from another point in time can be sent. Visual art can also be used to **commemorate** (mark) an event, to **memorialize** or remember people or places no longer in physical existence (you can no longer see or talk to them). This type of visual art seeks to keep their memory alive for others to learn about. But, if you are creating a work of art on your own about a period in history, others can get some idea, through your piece of artwork, what this particular period in history was like.

Many artists use a style called **abstract expressionism,** which is an artist's way of showing feelings and emotions through artwork. This type of abstract artwork has a hidden message and at times, can be difficult to understand.

Throughout history, African Americans have not been **portrayed** (pictured, written about, spoken about) positively or as they really lived.(see fig 1) Many times they were not able to write or make images of themselves because some could not read or write English or were not allowed to learn. Most early African Americans used other forms of art to express themselves such as through the **oral tradition** (the art of story telling), song, and dance.

They wanted to pass on African history, cultural practices and knowledge to future children and adults. Some of the culture that Africans and African Ameri-cans had while living as enslaved and free persons has been lost.

Since most of the images (hand made pictures, paintings) of early African Americans made by Europeans were very negative (bad) many times they did not show true early African American life. A different kind of freedom could be gained by reading and writing English and creating art of all kinds about their experience as African Americans.

Many positive (good) and true written stories and pictures of early African American life were left out of history books and early newspapers. In most cases, these stories or pictures did not reflect the kinds of stories other parts of society wanted to see, read or learn about African Americans. If there were stories written and pictures made of them, about the ways that they lived, or the important things they did in life, there were no particular times or dates given. The details of their lives were often unclear and the information given was not true or was a stretch of the truth.

The true events of early African American experience in New York (from 1626 to 1664 called New Amsterdam), includes a rich history recorded in small numbers or unofficially recorded in diaries or handwritten letters. By the early nineteenth century (1800s) there were 3,499 free African and African Americans and 2,868 enslaved Africans and African Americans living in New York. They had already begun to establish churches and communities and were publicly demanding their rights.

In 1808, the end of the slave trade was celebrated in New York City, and it is believed that this celebration was stopped out of respect for so many other Africans and African Americans who were still enslaved. From historical records, we can tell that many limits were imposed on African Americans wanting to have the freedom to gather together for any reason or occasion (even if they were important or special). Many of the early strict British laws created against a group of Africans or African Americans gathering together in the street, for any reason, were outdated but not forgotten.

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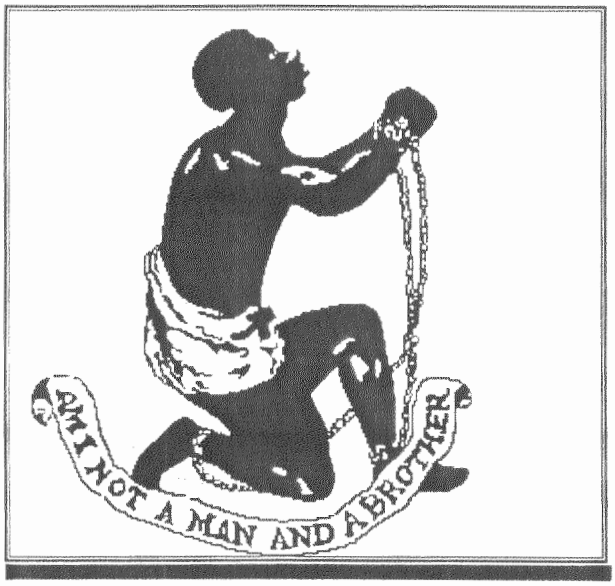
A year later, in 1809, members of the **African Mutual Relief Society** (a group of people working together to help it's members who were having financial problems), celebrated their first year anniversary by marching in the streets with a banner. The banner had an image created by them on it of an enslaved African man with chains around his wrists, and a question was written: **"Am I Not A Man And A Brother?"** It was said that many white "friends" of the marchers told them it would be foolish for them to march. Of course they didn't listen.

Marches like the one organized in 1808 to celebrate the end of the Slave Trade in colonial New York and the march organized a year later by the African Mutual Relief Society in 1809 using the "Am I Not A Man and A Brother?" banner were some of the first ways the early African Americans **visualized** (made others see) how they felt as African American New Yorkers about the way they were treated as a people.



Suggested Readings:

- Ziggy and the Black Dinosaurs, by Sharon M. Draper Just Us Books, Inc.
- Proudly Red and Black: Stories of Africans and Native Americans by William Loren Katz and Paula Franklin, Athenum Press
- Black Heroes of the American Revolution by Burke Davis, An Odyssey Book
- Children of Promise: African American Literature and Art for Young People, ed. by Charles Sullivan, Harry N. Abrams, Inc.

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Can You Figure Out These Words From the Story?

1. To remember people or places no longer in physical existence, maybe using a painting or sculpture.

   M _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _

2. Something you can see using your talent or imagination to make interesting creations.

   V _ _ _ _ _ A _ _

3. An artist's way of showing feelings and emotions through artwork. This type of artwork may have a hidden message and may at times, be difficult to read.

   A _ _ _ _ _ _ _ E _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _

4. Pictured, written about, talked about

   P _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _

5. A group of people working together to help it's members who were having financial problems.

   A_ _ _ _ _ _ M_ _ _ _ _ _ R_ _ _ _ _ _ S_ _ _ _ _ _

6. The art of story telling

   O _ _ _ T _ _ _ _ _ _ _

7. Handmade pictures or paintings

   I _ _ _ _ _

8. To mark by some ceremony or observation

   C _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _

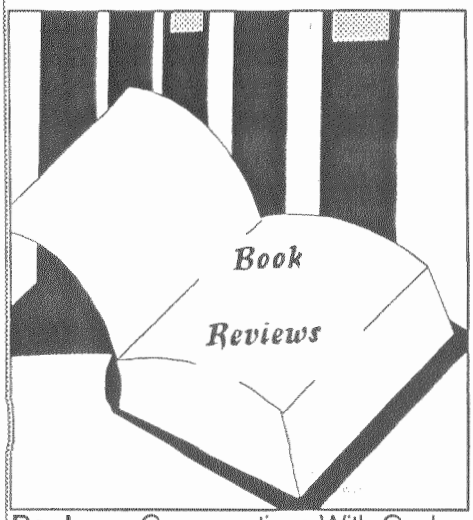
9. Made others see

   V _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _

10. What was the question written in the banner?

Answers:

1. Memorialize
2. Visual Art
3. Abstract Expressionism
4. Portrayed
5. African Mutual Relief Society
6. Oral Tradition
7. Images
8. Commemorate
9. Visualized
10. Am I Not A Man and a Brother?



Book: Conversations With God: Two Centuries of Prayers by African Americans
Publisher: Harper Perennial (1994) $13.00
Author: Ed. by James Melvin Washington, Ph.D
Reviewer: Sherrill D. Wilson, Ph.D.

When asked how Africans survived the horrors of the middle passage, enslavement, and even emancipation in America, for many the answer was a one word response: G-O-D.

James Melvin Washington's compilation of prayers from two centuries document an enduring faith in a higher power held by many African descended people throughout their existence in America. In this collection's introduction, the editor voices concerns and reluctance to expose the most intimate conversations between African people and God to "cynicism that has often made the spiritual life of my people part of a cultural menagerie."

Given the pervasive notion that has been supported by both African American and European scholars that little written documentation exists on the spiritual lives of African and African Americans, this is an invaluable collection. It spans the 18th through the 20th century. The collection is chronologically arranged: Part I Slavery and the Eclipse of the African Gods 1760-1860; Part II The Crucible of the Anglo-African Conscience; Part III The Value of Tears 1894-1919; Part IV The New Negro, 1920-1955; Part V The Civil Rights Ethos and Part VI Post-modern African American Worlds 1981-1994.

A Prayer for Trust
by Peter Williams, Jr.

O, Lord! we presume not to arraign thy counsels.
Thou knowest what is best.

Though clouds and darkness are around me, justice and judgement are the habitation of they seat.

Teach us, o heavenly father, teach us resignation to thy will, and we shall find it all to be right in the end.

(1817)

The prayers of some of the best known advocates for enslaved and free African and African American people are included in this volume. They include: Richard Allen, Absalom Jones, Peter Williams, Jr., Jarena Lee, Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglass, Paul Lawrence Dunbar, Martin Luther King Jr., Jesse Jackson and many others.

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Book: The Black Holocaust for Beginners
Publisher: Writers and Readers Publishing, Inc. (1995) $11.00
Author: S.E. Anderson
Reviewer: Emilyn L. Brown

TO BE SOLD. S.E. Anderson's aim in writing The Black Holocaust for Beginners was to create "a starting point for anyone who wants to know about the development of racism, capitalism and the resulting pillage and plunder of Africa." Described as a "documentary comic book," its likely to appeal to an inter-generational audience for its compact treatment of the African slave trade and for addressing many of the misconceptions that minimize, rather than explain its twin legacy of economic empowerment and human suffering.

For instance, Anderson as well as other scholars on the subject, cite the human statistics associated with the slave trade as a glaring example of historical shortsightedness. The author contends that to understand the full impact of enslavement, is to understand how these numbers are interpreted, and by whom. This goal is accomplished by taking the reader on a journey to Africa's past, revisiting the social, educational, and cultural systems in place centuries before the coming of Christ. He addresses the issue of Africans enslaving Africans, distinguishing its practice from chattel slavery without condoning it. Details of the Arab slave trade, initiated between 650-700 a.d, establish the pattern later adopted by the Portuguese whose stranglehold on the slave trade by the 15th century was interrupted by the Dutch. It was under 18th century British rule however that slavery was institutionalized,

becoming, in Anderson's words, the first "multi-national." Profits from slavery supported European and American expansion but Anderson contends there is only grudging recognition of the real "roots" of capitalism. He further argues that this lack of recognition translates into a smaller number of victims in the historical record. Anderson's estimate of 50 to 80 million deaths in the Black Holocaust dwarfs the "academically accepted" figure of ten million (eight million enslaved, 2 million deaths) used by historian Philip Curtin. The larger estimate spans 1400 years taking into account those who perished during raids on countless villages, on the long trek to slave dungeons and within their dank holding cells. More well known were the deaths that occurred from suffocation or drowning in the dark holds of the "death ships" and in the shark infested waters of the Atlantic. These deaths were in addition to the 20 to 40 million Africans who survived to face life long bondage.

But even the magnitude of these numbers, as well as other brutal facts concerning slavery, may still seem like an abstract history lesson for the uninformed reader. To counter this, Anderson brings history to life through the creative use of ship logs, doctors records, newspapers,census reports and diaries, providing a frank view of what it meant to be enslaved. From the diary of Samuel Ajayi Crowther, for instance, there are cruel memories of the day members of his village were enslaved: "Women, some with four, or six children clinging to their arms... overtaken by the enemies with a noose of rope thrown over the neck of every individual, to be led in the manner of goats..."

Equally instructive is a passage from a 17th century ship log in which Dutchman William Bosman describes branding the company's 'property.' "The Invalides and the maimed are thrown out...the remainder are numbered...I doubt not but that this trade seems very barbarous to you, but since it is followed by meer necessity it must go on..."

Written text is supported by artwork that effectively recall the horrors of enslavement through scenes of shipboard insurrections, the commonplace occurrence of rape, the ravages of disease, and release of death. These evocative graphics, created by Vanessa Holley and the young men and women of the Cro-Maat Collective, deserve special mention.
In the final leg of Anderson's journey, we meet survivors of the Black Holocaust

Artwork: Cro-Maat Collective
Printed courtesy of S.E. Anderson

through an imaginative and intuitive use of literary characters. Piercing the historical silence surrounding the transition of enslaved Africans to the plantations and urban centers of the "new world," the author details how seeds of dissent and struggle are passed on by survivors Adun and Oludin to subsequent generations.
In this way he succeeds in weaving together the threads of African life before and after enslavement. **The Black Holocaust for Beginners** not only succeeds in its quest to correct essential facts and figures, it celebrates the past by making important distinctions between those who live history as opposed to those who merely interpret it.

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WOMEN'S HISTORY IN NYC

Can you name?

1. The business exec. who established the Queen Booking Corp., a million dollar public relations firm headquartered in NY.

2. The medical pioneer in the study of sickle-cell anemia, who served as director of the Sickle-Cell Anemia Clinic at Jamaica Hospital.

3. The N.Y.C Family Court Judge who began as a volunteer for the Legal Aid Society, eventually establishing its Harlem Branch.

4. The educator who has held various posts in the NYC public school system beginning as a district superintendant in 1969.

Answers

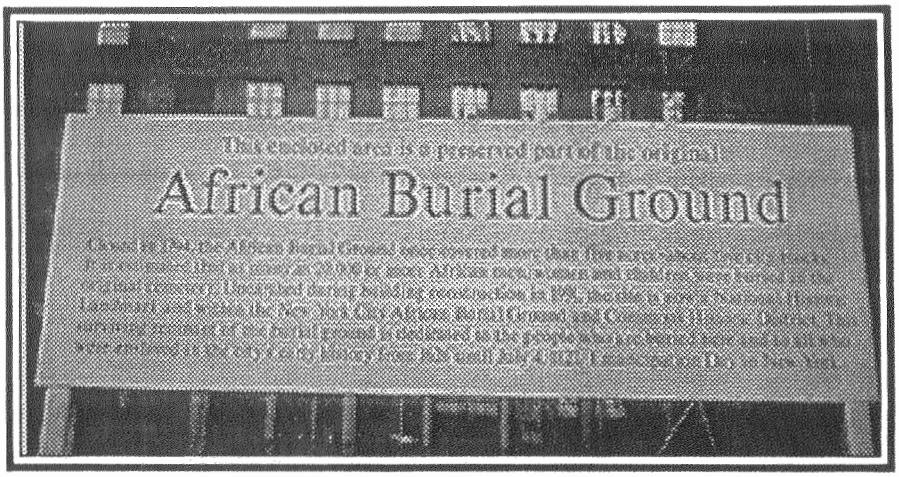
1. Ruth J. Bowen
2. Yvette Fae Francis
3. Edith Miller
4. Edythe J. Gaines

Source: Encyclopedia of Black America, Low & Clift, 1981

In the next issue of UPDATE:

- **African American Beginnings (Part V)**
- **Five Points: An update**
- **A Report on the Artifacts recovered from NYC's African Burial Ground**

ADDRESS


This enclosed area is a preserved part of the original
African Burial Ground